



Is Your School Librarian ‘Highly Qualified’?

With all the pressures on today’s teachers and administrators, Ms. Kaplan wants to be sure that they realize that they can turn to their school’s library media specialist for instructional support. When teachers and library media specialists collaborate, differentiated instruction becomes more feasible, and student achievement rises.

By Allison G. Kaplan

NOT LONG ago, I was talking with an assistant principal who was gushing about “her” school librarian. The principal said she just loved this librarian because all the kids liked her and she read such great stories. I replied that a strong literacy program was very important to a successful school library media program. But what, I inquired, was the librarian doing to collaborate with the classroom teachers

to help them meet the state curriculum standards and to make AYP (adequate yearly progress)? The assistant principal just looked at me and then finally said, “I had no idea the librarian could do that!” Not only can a school library media specialist “do that,” but librarians are in fact educated to “do that.”

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The national guidelines for school library media programs clearly establish that the goal of the school library media specialist is to provide an instructional program that helps students and faculty become efficient and effective users of information. Along with running the library at a technical level as the program administrator, the school library media specialist is also a teacher, an instructional partner, and an information specialist.¹ Indeed, most states require that, in order to become a certified school library media specialist, the candidate must be a licensed classroom teacher. Therefore, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), is lobbying to include school library media specialists as highly qualified teachers in the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).²

HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS OR NOT?

In the language of NCLB, a highly qualified teacher is one who has “obtained full State certification as a teacher (including certification obtained through alternative routes to certification) or passed the State teacher licensing examination, and holds a license to teach in such State.”³ All 50 states and the District of Columbia have certification requirements for school library media specialists.⁴ While it may be true that a specific school or district opts not to hire certified school library media specialists, the fact remains that there is a certification requirement in each state. The licensed school library media specialist will be trained as a classroom teacher (by virtue of a bachelor’s degree in education or via an alternative certification program) and as a specialist in the subject area of information literacy (by virtue of a graduate degree or credits in library and information science or in education). In addition, school library media specialists are among the 24 subject-area specializations eligible for national board certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. It certainly appears, then, that school library media specialists fit the NCLB definition of highly qualified teachers.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL LIBRARY MEDIA SPECIALIST?

Let’s go back to the assistant principal in our story. This administrator was responsible for evaluating the school library media specialist. Every year the administrator gave the school library media specialist a stellar evaluation because the children liked going to the li-

brary media center and she read great stories. But as was clear from the assistant principal’s statements, she truly did not know what the library media specialist was supposed to be doing. (For an example of what a school library media specialist can do in an integrated program, see the sidebar, “What Does an Integrated Program Look Like?” on page 302.) In times of financial difficulties, it can seem that cutting the person who reads great stories makes a great deal of sense because it will save a lot of money. But let’s see what the school library media specialist should be doing and then decide if cutting that position makes sense.

As I noted above, the school library media specialist is a program administrator. This means that, in addition to knowing how to maintain a functioning library, he or she knows which books and databases to buy to support the reading and research needs of both students and faculty members. He or she knows how to select age-appropriate materials, organize them, check items in and out, and write up the necessary statistical reports. As a program administrator, the school library media specialist understands the fundamentals of librarianship with respect to literacy, collection development, organization, and management.

The school library media specialist is also an information specialist. This means that he or she knows the sources of information in all formats, both print and electronic. He or she understands the importance of technology in an educational setting, how to integrate the use of technology into the curricular offerings of the school community, and what skills students need to succeed in the 21st century.⁵

Finally, the school library media specialist is a teacher and instructional partner. As such, he or she understands the foundations of instruction in diverse learning and cultural settings and encourages the development and implementation of collaborative instructional units. He or she knows how to teach the information and technology skills our students need to be successful in today’s information economy, knows how to teach students with diverse learning abilities and with diverse cultural backgrounds, and knows how to work with the other school faculty members to help meet the state and school curricular standards.

Independent studies conducted over the years have shown a strong link between a strong school library media program and student achievement.⁶ Strong library media programs are defined as those that are integrated into the school curriculum with unlimited access to the collections and current materials. The centers are run by certified school library media specialists who possess the attributes described above, have the support

of their administrators, and work in schools that encourage collaboration.

IS YOUR SCHOOL LIBRARY MEDIA SPECIALIST HIGHLY QUALIFIED?

Sadly, there is little research published for administrators about the role of the school library media specialist.⁷ Similarly, past research tells us that preservice administrators learn little about the role of school library

media specialists in their education programs.⁸ Most of what school administrators know about school library media specialists they learn from personal experience, not through any systematic education or exposure to the literature. If they have had a positive experience, then they might be more likely to require an integrated library media program in their schools. However, if their experience was less than satisfactory, they might be happy just to have a nice, friendly librarian who is liked by staff and students.

What Does an Integrated Program Look Like?

■ Christine Payne is the school library media specialist at Olive B. Loss Elementary School in the Appoquinimink School District in Delaware. In 2007, Christine earned her National Board Certification in library media. The school itself is relatively new (opened in 2002) and serves a population of about 600 students in grades 1-5. The district has a flexible-schedule policy for all school libraries, which means that the library periods do not serve merely to provide planning time for classroom teachers. Christine has no paid aide and so depends heavily on the support of her parent volunteers.

According to the school profile, the library functions as “the literary hub of our school — open five days a week to serve students and staff during the school year, and part time during the summer.” Strong administrative support of the library media program at the building and district levels plays an important part in providing Christine the opportunity to connect and collaborate with the classroom teachers in her school.

At the beginning of each semester, Christine sends an e-mail message to the classroom teachers reminding them of the possibilities in teaching collaboratively. In September 2006, Charmaine Davis, a fourth-grade teacher with whom Christine had collaborated before, responded to such a message saying she wanted to do “something different.”

The two met one morning before school to discuss the project. After two face-to-face meetings and numerous e-mail messages, the instructors put together a geometry unit. Charmaine planned the background instruction that would take place in the classroom before the students visited the library to conduct their research. In the library, Christine taught some information literacy lessons (research skills, evaluating print and online resources, and note-taking) while Charmaine served as back-up for students having difficulties. The writing process was team-taught in the library.

The Lesson

■ Students selected from a list a two- or three-dimensional shape or a type of angle. In the library, they conducted research using *Math to Know* books, encyclopedias, and Internet sites such as www.teachers.ash.org.au/jeather/maths/dictionary.html to locate information to help them understand the shape or angle they had chosen and to connect it to their experience of the world. They learned the definition of the shape, its properties, and vocabulary items related to it. They explored interesting facts and where they might see their shape in the real world. They also learned about Internet and print resources and about how to know when a resource is useful or not. In addition, the students learned about editing and rhyme schemes to help them write poems about the shape or angle.

The final product included a research journal in which students recorded their research process, a math poem about the selected shape or angle, and illustrations from everyday life. The students put together a book of the math riddles that they had written, to be submitted to Kids Are Authors, a literary contest sponsored by Scholastic.

The library media specialist did more than merely provide resources for the unit; she was an integral part of its planning, implementation, and assessment. By working together, Christine and Charmaine created a unit that would have been overwhelming for a single instructor. The unit met mathematics, English language, and information literacy standards in a way that was authentic. Working together also allowed the instructors to diversify the lessons according to the levels of the individual students.

With the support of administrators, the library media program is an integrated part of the curriculum at Olive B. Loss, and the students are reaching levels of achievement far above the average scores for other Delaware schools. — AGK

But now we know better, and there are questions administrators should ask themselves about the staffing of their school's library media center:

- Do you have a full-time certified school library media specialist in your school? If yes, what are you doing to help create a collaborative environment in your school to integrate the school library media program into the school curriculum? If not, what are you doing to lobby to have that position filled by a certified specialist or, if the position has been cut, to have it reinstated?

- Does the school library media specialist engage in the activities described above?

- Do you require those activities of him or her?

The AASL website offers a short downloadable brochure that describes what administrators need to know about school library media specialists. The brochure can be found at www.ala.org/ala/aasl/schlibrariesandyou/schoollibraries.cfm. Take a look at this information, and then sit down for a heart-to-heart chat with your school library media specialist. Money is too short, accountability is too demanding, and student achievement is too important to accept an ineffective school library media program.

FEDERAL AND LOCAL ACTION

At the time this article was written, NCLB was up for reauthorization. An amendment was proposed by Sens. Jack Reed (D-R.I.) and Thad Cochran (R-Miss.) and by Reps. Raul Grijalva (D-Ariz.) and Vernon Ehlers (R-Mich.). It is known as the Strengthening Kids' Interest in Learning and Libraries (SKILLS) Act. The SKILLS Act requires all schools to have a highly qualified school library media specialist, along with the resources to provide the necessary materials to support the school curriculum and to meet the reading needs of the students. This legislation acknowledges, at the national level, the instructional role played by the school librarian and by the library media program. The very existence of this legislation offers support for the administrator who needs help in arguing for a full-time certified school library media specialist in his or her school.

However, if this legislation is not

enough, try exploring some of the resources cited in the notes to this article. And don't forget to talk directly with your school library media specialist. It's important that you work to provide your students with the instructional partner they need to help them succeed.

1. American Association of School Librarians and Association of Educational Communications and Technology, *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1998).

2. ALA Washington Office, "No Child Left Behind," at www.ala.org/ala/washoff/WOissues/schoollibraries/nochildleftbehind/nochildleftbehind.htm.


3. P.L. 107-110, Title IX, sec. 9101(23).

4. Margie J. Thomas and Patsy H. Perritt, "A Higher Standard," *School Library Journal*, electronic version, December 2003, at www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA339562.html.

5. For more about 21st-century skills, see The Partnership for 21st Century Skills at www.21stcenturyskills.org.

6. For a summary of all of the "state" studies, see the Library Research Service Web page on school library studies at www.lrs.org/impact.php; and School Libraries Work at www.scholastic.com/librarians/printables/downloads/slw_2006.pdf.

7. For a short discussion on current research in education regarding school libraries, see Gary N. Hartzell, "What's It Take?," presentation at the White House Conference on School Libraries, 4 June 2002, published as a supplement to the September/October 2002 issue of *Knowledge Quest*, pp. 27-43.

8. Two studies that review this research are Linda Veltze, "School Library Media Program Information in the Principalship Preparation Program," *School Library Media Annual*, vol. 10, 1992, pp. 129-34; and Patricia J. Wilson, Martha Blake, and Josette Anne Lyders, "Principals and Teacher-Librarians: A Study and a Plan for Partnership," *Emergency Librarian*, September/October 1993, pp. 18-24. 

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